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Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law and Politics

Original Research

Discourse Analysis of the Eleventh President's Speeches in International Organizations (Causes and Actions)

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Governments, based on their approaches and interests, emphasize various discursive elements and signifiers within international organizations and produce a specific discourse. The primary goal of such actions by governments is to introduce a semantic system, highlight their discursive signifiers and elements, and simultaneously oppose and marginalize rival discourses. The Eleventh Administration of Iran (2013–2017), known as the "Prudence and Hope" administration and associated with the discourse of moderation, sought to utilize the platform of international meetings and summits to articulate its semantic framework on key foreign policy issues. This article aims to examine and identify the internal logic and semantic system of the speeches delivered by Mr. Hassan Rouhani, the Eleventh President of Iran, in international meetings and summits by employing the discourse analysis theory of Laclau and Mouffe. It introduces the most significant articulated signifiers and elements, and analyzes the causes, objectives, and actions associated with the adoption and use of these signifiers and elements. The findings of this study indicate that, in addition to addressing key regional and international issues, Mr. Rouhani frequently employed phrases such as "constructive engagement," "violence and extremism," "terrorism," "peaceful nuclear activities," "nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation," and "lifting of sanctions" more than other signifiers and elements in international organizations. The main reasons for referencing each of these signifiers and elements—which constitute major themes in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran—include the expression of the Eleventh Administration's foreign policy approach, responding to statements by European and American officials, and efforts to oppose and differentiate from the discourses and narratives of Western countries. The article also offers suggestions related to each of these signifiers.

Keywords: International Organizations, Eleventh Administration, Discourse Analysis, Discourse of Moderation, Eleventh President.

How to cite this article:
Ebrahimzadeh, A., Motaharnia, M., & Parizad, R. (2025). Discourse Analysis of the Eleventh President's Speeches in International Organizations (Causes and Actions). *Interdisciplinary Studies in Society, Law, and Politics, 4*(3), 1-12. https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.isslp.4.3.19

1. Introduction

In the evolving and competitive environment of international politics, the formulation and projection of discourse have emerged as strategic instruments through which states articulate identity, construct meaning, and pursue legitimacy. Discourse, in this context, functions not merely as language use but as a structured field of signification that produces social and political realities. The Islamic Republic of Iran, particularly under the Eleventh Administration led by President Hassan Rouhani (2013–2017), strategically employed discourse in international organizations to project a narrative of moderation, constructive engagement, and resistance against dominant Western

representations. This introduction aims to explore the theoretical underpinnings, contextual foundations, and analytical necessity of examining President Rouhani's international speeches through the lens of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, while situating this analysis within broader scholarly debates on Iran's foreign policy discourse and international interaction.

Discourse theory, as conceptualized by Laclau and Mouffe, emphasizes the role of articulated nodal points (or master signifiers) around which meaning is organized and contested in a hegemonic struggle (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In political contexts, discourse is not a neutral medium but a terrain of conflict wherein ideologies materialize and power is negotiated (Howarth, 2000; Howarth et al., 2000). According to this perspective, the political identity of a state, its strategic narratives, and its antagonistic or agonistic postures are discursively constructed (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2018; Marsh & Stoker, 1999). The application of discourse theory to the analysis of Rouhani's speeches allows us to examine how Iran sought to reconstitute its international image, challenge hegemonic global orders, and produce an alternative semantic structure rooted in Islamic and nationalistic values (Rahmati et al., 2020).

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has framed its foreign policy within ideological discourses grounded in independence, anti-imperialism, and Islamic universalism (Ashouri, 1991; Simbar, 2016). However, the discourse of moderation introduced by Rouhani marked a strategic shift, emphasizing dialogue, mutual respect, and integration into the international system without compromising sovereign principles (Ajili & Afsharian, 2016; Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2014). This discursive turn was a calculated response to the international isolation imposed by sanctions and the confrontational rhetoric of the previous administration. Scholars have underscored that moderation, in Rouhani's usage, did not imply political passivity, but rather a strategic re-articulation of Iran's position to contest the dominant securitizing narratives imposed by Western actors (Alemi et al., 2018; Kameli et al., 2022; Mahmoudikia, 2018).

International organizations such as the United Nations offer states a critical platform to project their discourse, seek normative legitimacy, and counterbalance asymmetrical power relations in global governance (Amini, 2007; Tabatabaei, 2007; Zarif & Sajjadpour,

2010). President Rouhani, leveraging these forums, recurrently foregrounded signifiers such as "constructive engagement," "dialogue," "anti-violence," "extremism," "nuclear disarmament," and "sanctions relief" to redefine Iran's international identity (Rouhani, 2013b; Zarif, 2014). These terms did not emerge in isolation but were embedded within a broader semantic chain that articulated Iran as a rational, peace-seeking actor positioned against the irrationality of war, coercion, and unilateralism (Rahmati et al., 2020; Rezaei & Torabi, 2013). Discourse theory reveals how this re-articulation sought to shift the frontier between the Self (Iran as peacebuilder) and the Other (Western coercive powers) (Kasraei & Pouzesh Shirazi, 2009; Soltani, 2005).

Numerous studies have explored the conceptual and empirical dimensions of Iran's foreign policy during Rouhani's presidency. Akbarzadeh and Conduit (2016) argue that Rouhani adopted a pragmatic approach, framed in moderate rhetoric, to rebuild Iran's image after years of isolation and confrontation (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2016). Others highlight how this rhetoric was concretely embedded in initiatives such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which redefined Iran's nuclear posture within a cooperative framework (Kameli et al., 2022; Rouhani, 2013a). However, the strategic use of discourse in this period was not limited to nuclear negotiations. Discursive elements such as "a world against violence and extremism," enshrined in a UN resolution, reflect Iran's attempt to frame itself as a regional stabilizer and norm entrepreneur (Kazemi Naeini, 2015; Kazemi Naeini et al., 2017). In this vein, the study of Rouhani's speeches in international organizations provides a valuable empirical lens for understanding the interplay between discourse, identity, and strategy.

The significance of discourse in shaping global perceptions of Iran is especially pronounced in the context of international sanctions and nuclear diplomacy. Sanctions, framed as instruments of coercive diplomacy by the West, were discursively reinterpreted by Rouhani's administration as unjust, illegal, and counterproductive (Manzour & Mostafapour, 2013; Mosallinejad, 2015; Takeyh & Maloney, 2011). By constructing a counter-narrative that emphasized peaceful nuclear activities and Iran's adherence to international law, Rouhani aimed to deconstruct the

securitization of Iran in global forums (Daryaei, 2008; Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2015; Fallahi, 2017). This aligns with Laclau and Mouffe's idea of "dislocation," whereby dominant discourses are disrupted and reconstituted through new articulations (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Moghadami, 2011).

Furthermore, the role of "floating signifiers" such as terrorism and extremism in Rouhani's discourse deserves analytical attention. These terms, which lack fixed meaning, are subject to discursive contestation and appropriation (Asgarian et al., 2015; Poursaeed, 2009). While Western narratives often associated Iran with support for terrorism, Rouhani re-signified these concepts by positioning Iran as a victim of terrorism and a leader in regional anti-terrorism initiatives. This re-signification not only delegitimized rival narratives but also aimed to normalize Iran's regional policies in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan (Khosravi Bab Anari, 2017; Simbar & Moradi Kalarde, 2015). The strategic use of such signifiers also served to mobilize global public opinion, especially in the Global South, and build coalitions against the hegemony of Western representations (Gholamshahi Katj & Faez Dinparasti, 2016; Osiewicz, 2019).

The theoretical and methodological relevance of discourse analysis in this context is further underscored by works that bridge political science and linguistic approaches. Bahrampour (2004) and Ghajari (2013) emphasize that discourse analysis enables scholars to identify latent power relations, ideological structures, and exclusionary practices embedded in political speech (Bahrampour, 2004; Ghajari & Nazari, 2013). Moreover, authors such as Howarth (1998) and McDonnell (2001) underline that discourse theory moves beyond content analysis by situating utterances within a broader field of meaning, power, and identity (Howarth, 1998; McDonnell, 2001). In the Iranian case, where foreign policy is deeply intertwined with revolutionary ideology and domestic legitimacy, discourse serves as both an instrument of diplomacy and a reflection of internal political dynamics (Majidi & Rahimiania, 2018; Masoudi, 2022).

This analytical framework gains additional importance when considering Iran's relations with international organizations, which have historically oscillated between cooperation and confrontation. As noted by Maleki (2012), Iran's engagement with the UN has been shaped by mutual suspicion, selective compliance, and contested legitimacy (Maleki & Babaei, 2012). The Rouhani administration sought to recalibrate this relationship by aligning Iran's discursive commitments with global norms, such as disarmament, peaceful dispute resolution, and respect for international law (Gharibabadi, 2002; Tabaraki & Jamali, 2013; Zamaninia & Hashemi, 2012). However, this normative alignment was not devoid of political calculation, as it aimed to re-legitimize Iran's global standing and counterbalance regional isolation.

Ultimately, this study fills a significant gap in the literature by systematically analyzing the semantic architecture of Rouhani's speeches in international organizations. While previous research has documented the policy outcomes of the Eleventh Administration, fewer studies have deconstructed the discursive mechanisms through which those policies were justified, legitimized, and internationalized. Through a close reading of Rouhani's speeches and the identification of key signifiers, this research elucidates how the discourse of moderation functioned as a strategic tool of foreign policy during a period of heightened global scrutiny and geopolitical turbulence. Drawing upon the theoretical contributions of Laclau and Mouffe, this study demonstrates how the Rouhani administration's discourse sought to challenge hegemonic narratives, construct a legitimate international identity, and articulate a new vision for Iran's place in the world system.

In conclusion, President Rouhani's engagement with international organizations represented more than diplomatic formalism; it was a deliberate discursive strategy to redefine Iran's global role, project ideological narratives, and shape the terrain of international legitimacy. The use of discourse theory not only clarifies the performative dimensions of foreign policy but also reveals the underlying ideological and identity-based struggles that animate international politics. This study, therefore, contributes to both theoretical refinement and empirical understanding of Iranian political discourse in the global arena.

2. Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Theory

In Persian-language scholarship, the term "discourse analysis" has been translated variously as *sokhan-kavi* (speech analysis), *tahlil-e kalam* (analysis of speech), and

tahlil-e goftar (analysis of discourse) (Ghajari & Nazari, 2013). Discourse analysis, based on the assumption that all phenomena, actions, and interventions are inherently meaningful, explores how systems of meaning—or discourses—shape individuals' understanding of their roles in society and influence political activity (Howarth et al., 2000, p. 2). In other words, it examines how structures of meaning enable specific forms of action and how these discourses, in turn, structure the activities of social agents. The analyst thus seeks to understand how discourses are produced, function, and evolve (Marsh & Stoker, 1999).

Since its inception, discourse analysis has aimed to reveal that no text, speech, or written narrative is neutral; rather, all are embedded in particular sociopolitical contexts (Bahrampour, 2004). The meanings of statements, the terms employed, and the propositions articulated are all contingent upon factors such as who made the statement, when and where it was made, how it was expressed, and in opposition to or support of what or whom (McDonnell, 2001). From an ontological perspective, discourse theory contends that no objective or fixed truths exist independently; rather, "truth" is always represented through discourse. Hence, the social world is a product of discourses, and both meanings and identities are inherently relative and subject to transformation as discourses shift (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Moghadami, 2011).

Within political science, various interpretations of discourse theory exist; however, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe are credited with presenting the most prominent discourse theory, one that has established deep connections with social actions, political behavior, and everyday political life (Hosseinizadeh, 2004; Tajik, 2004). Their model specifically engages with political processes and is rooted in post-structuralist and linguistic traditions, which they extend across the entirety of the social sphere (Hosseinizadeh, 2004). By embedding linguistic and discursive concepts into all domains of social life, Laclau and Mouffe introduce a radically new way of theorizing in the social sciences.

Laclau and Mouffe argue that all phenomena and behaviors are discursively constructed. In their view, for an object or action to become intelligible, it must be positioned within a broader framework of meaning (Marsh & Stoker, 1999). Accordingly, discourses are understood as systems of meaning in which signs

acquire identity and meaning through their differentiation from one another. These discourses shape our perception of reality and our understanding of the world (Howarth, 2000). The term "discourse" in their framework encompasses all social phenomena (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2018), meaning that for any object or activity to be meaningful, it must be embedded within a specific discourse (Howarth, 1998).

Drawing upon conceptual tools such as *hegemony*, *antagonism*, *articulation*, *dislocation*, *nodal point* (or *point de capiton*), *chain of equivalence*, and *chain of difference*, Laclau and Mouffe offer a robust analytical apparatus for examining sociopolitical phenomena (Tajik, 2004). A comprehensive understanding and application of their theory necessitate familiarity with these concepts (Kasraei & Pouzesh Shirazi, 2009).

Articulation: According to Laclau and Mouffe, discourse emerges through the articulation of related elements and concepts (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Articulation refers to the process by which diverse elements are gathered and combined to form a new identity or coherent meaning structure (Howarth, 1998).

Signifier (Dāll): Signifiers refer to persons, concepts, expressions, or symbolic entities—whether abstract or concrete—that carry a specific meaning within a particular discursive framework (Kasraei & Pouzesh Shirazi, 2009).

Master Signifier (Dāll-e Markazi): A master signifier is a privileged term around which other signifiers are organized. Through articulation processes that revolve around the master signifier, semantic coherence and discursive unity are achieved (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985).

Element: Elements are signs whose meanings have not yet been fixed and remain open to multiple interpretations. They acquire determinate meaning only when articulated within a specific discourse (Ghajari & Nazari, 2013).

Antagonism and Otherness: Discourses are inherently constituted in opposition and differentiation. Every discourse constructs itself by excluding and "othering" competing discourses. In essence, each discourse requires a rival to define and reinforce its own identity (Kasraei & Pouzesh Shirazi, 2009; Soltani, 2005).

Chain of Equivalence: In the process of articulation, key signifiers are connected in a chain of equivalence. These signifiers are themselves empty of specific content until they are filled with meaning through their relation to

other signs in the chain (Haghighat & Hosseinizadeh, 2014). Thus, their meaning is established relationally rather than referentially.

Together, these concepts provide a framework through which discourses can be understood as contingent, historically constructed systems of meaning that define social identities, political positions, and hegemonic struggles. The analytical utility of Laclau and Mouffe's theory lies in its ability to reveal how discourses gain or lose hegemonic status, how social consensus is formed and contested, and how power is distributed through language. It is through such a lens that the foreign policy discourse of Iran's Eleventh Administration under President Hassan Rouhani can be critically and systematically analyzed.

3. Discursive Elements of the Eleventh Administration in International Organizations and Summits

One of the most salient dimensions of the foreign policy of Iran's Eleventh Administration—framed within the *discourse of moderation*—is the discursive themes, articulated signifiers, and semantic elements emphasized by President Hassan Rouhani in international organizations and summits. The central topics highlighted in this context are as follows:

3.1. Constructive Engagement

"Constructive engagement" (*ta'amol-e sāzandeh*) functioned as the central signifier (nodal point) of the discourse of moderation (Rahmati et al., 2020). It evolved into the declared doctrine of the Eleventh Administration's foreign policy (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2014) and was also presented as a key to resolving Iran's political and economic challenges (Rezaei & Torabi, 2013). According to President Rouhani, economic development and political prestige are unattainable without constructive engagement with the international system (Bolouki et al., 2018). He thus declared constructive engagement as a foundational pillar of Iran's international conduct, based on mutual respect and shared interests:

"One of the theoretical and practical pillars of the government is constructive international engagement" (Rouhani, January 23, 2014);

"Iran seeks constructive interaction based on mutual respect and shared interests with other countries" (Rouhani, September 25, 2013) (Rouhani, 2013b).

The adoption of this policy was driven by several strategic objectives: to open new opportunities in foreign policy, initiate an era of active and interactive diplomacy, exit political deadlocks (Ajili & Afsharian, 2016), reframe the Islamic Republic as a responsible actor in peace and security, and lift Security Council resolutions and multilateral sanctions (Mahmoudikia, 2018). It also aimed to reduce Western pressures (Bolouki et al., 2018), and sharply contrast with the confrontational and incendiary rhetoric of former President Ahmadinejad (Alemi et al., 2018). The Rouhani administration came into office amid heightened international tensions caused by the radical stances of the Ninth and Tenth Administrations (Masoudi, 2022). The aggressive radicalism, security crises, targeted Western sanctions, and invocation of Chapter VII of the UN Charter during that period posed substantial problems for Iran (Saremi et al., 2021).

Moreover, the discourse of constructive engagement was partly a reaction against Western portrayals of Iran as extremist or retrogressive, echoing the radicalism of the 1980s (Gasiorowski, 2007). It also offered a discursive counter-narrative to the principlist discourse of justice propagated by previous administrations, which had alienated Iran from constructive global interactions (Gholamshahi Katj & Faez Dinparasti, 2016).

The discourse of moderation created a chain of equivalence linking several key concepts—particularly the nuclear issue—under the broader category of engagement: equitable and fair engagement, engagement on global issues, engagement based on mutual respect and interests, sustainable trust-building, constructive regional engagement, and engagement aligned with Islamic revolutionary values. Foreign Minister Zarif reiterated this stance: "We are a peace-loving nation seeking constructive interaction with the world to safeguard our national interests with reliance on divine authority" (Zarif, May 6, 2014) (Zarif, 2014).

Accordingly, the Eleventh Administration, which criticized the previous aggressive policies as humiliating and sanction-inducing, embraced constructive engagement and de-escalation, placing nuclear negotiations with global powers high on the agenda (Soltani Gardfaramerzi et al., 2019). The culmination of

this discourse was the engagement with P5+1 members leading to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which marked a high point of diplomatic achievement during Rouhani's presidency (Mahmoudikia, 2018).

3.2. Rejection of Violence and Extremism

Another central component of President Rouhani's foreign policy discourse in international settings was the rejection of all forms of violence. The moderation discourse is inherently constructed through opposition to violence and extremism, and these became among the most prominent signifiers in the Eleventh Administration's foreign and international discourse (Masoudi, 2022). From this perspective, violence and extremism were perceived as globalized phenomena:
"Violence and extremism have affected not only the material but also the spiritual dimensions of human life and today's society" (Rouhani, September 25, 2013);
"I come from a region engulfed in the flames of extremism… Extremism is not just a regional issue—it is a global one" (Rouhani, September 25, 2014) (Rouhani, 2013a).
Multiple factors led President Rouhani to emphasize this theme: the rise of extremist groups in the Middle East (Simbar & Moradi Kalarde, 2015), the emergence of ISIS, and the expansion of takfiri terrorist networks (Rahmati et al., 2020). These groups posed significant threats through fearmongering, destruction, and potential access to weapons of mass destruction (Zarif & Sajjadpour, 2010), destabilizing regional order (Khosravi Bab Anari, 2017), and threatening international peace and security (Kazemi Naeini et al., 2017). Moreover, the Iranian diplomatic apparatus placed the rejection of violence at the core of its mission (Simbar, 2016). In an address to the UN General Assembly, Rouhani stated:
"Eradicating violence in the region is not possible without democracy, the promotion of civil rights, and economic development" (Rouhani, September 22, 2016). The moderation discourse holds that sustainable and comprehensive peace and security must be pursued multilaterally within the framework of international institutions and coalitions (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2014). Hence, rejection of violence became one of the most recurrent topics in Rouhani's international speeches. He incorporated a wide array of issues into a

chain of equivalence under this category: strategic violence by global powers, institutional violence against Palestine, state and non-state violence, sectarian and racial violence, and catastrophic acts of violence in Syria. Thus, violence and extremism were framed as the primary "Other" in the foreign policy discourse of moderation (Masoudi, 2022). Zarif similarly emphasized regional cooperation to combat terrorism:
"Through negotiation and cooperation, we can secure regional interests and even confront terrorist groups effectively" (Zarif, January 20, 2016) (Zarif, 2014).
A major initiative undertaken by the Eleventh Administration was the "World Against Violence and Extremism" (WAVE) proposal, presented by Rouhani in 2013 at the 68th session of the UN General Assembly. The proposal was adopted unanimously and became known by its acronym, WAVE. The resolution emphasized three principles:
1. States' commitment to upholding fundamental human rights,
2. Prohibition of the use or threat of force in international relations,
3. Condemnation of support for violent conduct (Kazemi Naeini, 2015).
As Zarif noted, the WAVE initiative served as a powerful warning to the world regarding the dangers of violence and extremism and provided a clear roadmap for countering extremist violence (Zarif, June 18, 2015) (Zarif, 2014).
In summary, the discursive elements of the Eleventh Administration were characterized by strategic articulation of central signifiers such as *constructive engagement* and *rejection of violence and extremism*, both of which were deployed to construct a new international identity for Iran, counter rival narratives, and reposition Iran as a normative actor in global politics. These signifiers not only structured Iran's foreign policy discourse but also formed the basis for broader coalitions, resolutions, and policy shifts that aimed at transforming Iran's standing in the international system.

3.3. Counterterrorism

The issue of counterterrorism was one of the most salient signifiers employed by the discourse of moderation in international organizations. Often articulated alongside violence and extremism, terrorism was framed as a shared global challenge (Rouhani,

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2013a). President Rouhani described terrorism as a common threat to humanity and positioned the fight against it as a critical domain for new international cooperation:

"Terrorism and Takfiri ideologies pose a shared threat to humanity" (Rouhani, March 1, 2017);

"Confronting terrorism and violent extremism is one of the most vital areas of new cooperation" (Rouhani, July 9, 2015).

A key motivation for the emphasis on counterterrorism was the persistent effort by Western countries—particularly the United States—to label Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism. Through discursive strategies and political actions, the U.S. sought to isolate the Islamic Republic and delegitimize its international actions by framing them as terrorist conduct (Motaghi, 2008). Terrorism, as a form of violent action (De Mesquita, 2013), remains one of the most contested and politically loaded terms in international discourse (Poursaeed, 2009). The construction of terrorism and its associated actors has played a central role in U.S. foreign policy discourses, particularly in shaping the dichotomy between the Self and the Other (Asgarian et al., 2015).

The designation of Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism by American officials (Osiewicz, 2019) and its inclusion in annual "Country Reports on Terrorism" in years such as 2010, 2011, and 2012 reflect this discursive othering. Iran was also accused of supporting groups linked to al-Qaeda or those considered terrorist organizations by the U.S. and the EU, such as certain Iraqi, Lebanese, and Palestinian groups. In contrast, Iran views such groups as legitimate resistance movements against Israeli occupation, thus creating a fundamental divergence in how terrorism is defined and interpreted between Iran and the West (Nejatpour et al., 2015).

The discourse of moderation placed multiple topics into a chain of equivalence under the umbrella of terrorism. These include terms like "terrorism flow," "good and bad terrorism," "international terrorism," "borderless and extremist terrorism," "terrorism seed," "Takfiri terrorism," and "the global threat of Takfiri terrorism." President Rouhani frequently combined these terms with calls for joint action, and Foreign Minister Zarif reinforced this by stating:

"Terrorism has nothing to do with Islam. Iran is ready, and we call upon our neighboring countries to be prepared to cooperate with the global community to combat terrorism, violence, and extremism. These are common enemies of all of us" (Zarif, January 20, 2016) (Zarif, 2014).

Among the most significant counterterrorism actions taken by the Eleventh Administration was the introduction of the WAVE initiative (World Against Violence and Extremism), originally proposed in 2013 at the 68th session of the UN General Assembly. This initiative, unanimously adopted as a UN resolution, consistently served as a platform for advocating against violence, extremism, and terrorism (Kazemi Naeini, 2015). President Rouhani later proposed that counterterrorism efforts be codified into a binding international legal instrument, stipulating that no state should use terrorism as a means of intervention in the internal affairs of other nations (Rouhani, September 28, 2015) (Rouhani, 2013b).

Further, at the Asian-African summit, President Rouhani introduced a "Comprehensive Approach to Eradicating Terrorism," which emphasized the sanctity of human life, the rejection of religiously-justified violence, the identification and elimination of recruitment mechanisms of terrorist groups, and the disruption of their financial, political, and intelligence networks (Rouhani, April 22, 2015).

3.4.   Nuclear Disarmament and Non-Proliferation

Nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation were among the most frequently emphasized themes in President Rouhani's speeches in international organizations. He consistently identified these objectives as essential to achieving global peace and stability:

"The Islamic Republic of Iran considers nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation necessary for international peace and stability" (Rouhani, September 13, 2013) (Rouhani, 2013a).

Disarmament is understood as the reduction or elimination of specific or all types of weaponry to end the arms race and promote global security (Ashouri, 1991; Morgenthau, 1995). It refers to depriving states of tools of warfare and has evolved alongside the advent of nuclear weapons (Daryaei, 2008). Both nuclear and non-nuclear states bear responsibilities under international law in this domain (Zamaninia & Hashemi, 2012).

The Rouhani administration's attention to this issue stemmed from multiple motivations. First, Iran aimed to affirm its commitment to the Treaty on the Non-

Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT). As Rouhani stated:

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is committed to the NPT based on legal obligations, religious and ethical teachings, and strategic considerations" (Rouhani, September 13, 2013) (Rouhani, 2013a).

Second, despite its NPT membership and prior advocacy for a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the Middle East (Tabaraki & Jamali, 2013), Iran faced persistent Western accusations—primarily from the U.S.—that it was pursuing weapons of mass destruction (Gharibabadi, 2002). Thus, the moderation discourse sought to redirect international attention toward the obligations of nuclear-armed states:

"The primary responsibility for nuclear disarmament lies with nuclear-weapon states" (Rouhani, September 26, 2013);

"It is regrettable that nuclear powers, rather than complying with legal obligations to eliminate WMDs, are instead strengthening their arsenals" (Zarif, September 30, 2015) (Zarif, 2014).

This discourse also emphasized Israel's undeclared nuclear capabilities and refusal to join international disarmament treaties, framing it as the key obstacle to establishing a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East. Iran contended that as long as Israel's arsenal remains unchecked, regional peace and stability would remain elusive (Tabaraki & Jamali, 2013).

"For nearly four decades, efforts to create a nuclear-weapon-free Middle East have failed… Israel, the only non-party to the NPT in the region, must immediately join the treaty" (Rouhani, September 26, 2013) (Rouhani, 2013a).

At the NPT Review Conference, Zarif reaffirmed this position:

"The leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement, in their 2012 Tehran summit, called on Israel to refrain from acquiring nuclear weapons and to join the NPT unconditionally and immediately, placing all nuclear facilities under IAEA safeguards" (Zarif, April 27, 2015) (Zarif, 2014).

Among the most important initiatives of the Eleventh Administration in this domain was the proposal to begin prompt negotiations on a comprehensive convention to ban the development, acquisition, production, testing, stockpiling, use, or threat of use of nuclear weapons and to facilitate their total elimination. Iran also proposed September 26 be designated as the International Day for the Total Elimination of Nuclear Weapons and called for a high-level conference to assess global disarmament progress (Rouhani, September 26, 2013) (Rouhani, 2013a).

3.5. Peaceful Nature of Iran's Nuclear Program

The affirmation of the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear activities has been among the most frequently repeated expressions in President Rouhani's international speeches (Zohouri Ainaldin & Pourali, 2019). Routinely, he emphasized the right to peaceful use of nuclear technology under international treaties:

"The Islamic Republic of Iran, based on its defensive doctrine and its ethical and religious principles, opposes nuclear weapons but considers the peaceful use of nuclear technology as a right of itself and all other nations" (Rouhani, May 21, 2014);

"In pursuing its nuclear program, Iran has never intended, nor intends, anything other than peaceful use" (Rouhani, January 23, 2014) (Rouhani, 2013a).

Alongside these references, President Rouhani often underscored the right to uranium enrichment as an inseparable entitlement of NPT signatories:

"The Islamic Republic of Iran… insists upon the inalienable right of all NPT members to access peaceful nuclear technology, including uranium enrichment" (Rouhani, September 13, 2013).

The significance of emphasizing peaceful nuclear activities stems from the centrality of this issue in Iran's foreign policy since 2002. European countries, the United States, and Israel launched extensive campaigns to build international consensus against Iran's nuclear activities (Fallahi, 2007), portraying its uranium enrichment as a covert effort to develop nuclear weapons (Gasiorowski, 2007), and sought to persuade industrial powers of this interpretation (Ahmadian & Ahmadi, 2014).

A critical feature of the Eleventh Administration's foreign policy discourse was the effort to resist securitizing narratives that framed Iran as a threat to international order (Dehghani Firouzabadi, 2014). Accordingly, the term "peaceful" became a constant modifier of all references to nuclear activity. Foreign Minister Zarif also reiterated this position at the Munich Security Conference:

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"We want to show the entire world that our nuclear movement is peaceful" (Zarif, February 8, 2015) (Zarif, 2014).

To counter the concerns voiced by Western leaders—especially from the U.S., Europe, and Israel—about Iran's nuclear intentions, the moderation discourse actively engaged in "othering" these critiques by exposing Israel's clandestine nuclear program and refusal to join global treaties. In this context, Rouhani and Zarif cited the 2012 NAM summit in Tehran:

"The heads of state and government of the Non-Aligned Movement expressed deep concern over Israel's possession of nuclear weapons, which constitutes a grave and persistent threat to regional and global security, and condemned Israel for continuing to develop and stockpile its nuclear arsenal" (Zarif, April 27, 2015) (Zarif, 2014).

One of the most notable actions of the Eleventh Administration to affirm the peaceful nature of its nuclear program was the prolonged negotiation with the P5+1 group, which culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015. President Rouhani described it as the resolution of a fabricated crisis and a major international achievement: "Resolving the fabricated crisis over Iran's peaceful nuclear program and reaching an internationally endorsed agreement, approved by the UN Security Council, is a great achievement not only for Iran but for the entire world" (Rouhani, March 1, 2017) (Rasouli Saniabadi, 2020).

3.6. Sanctions Relief

The Eleventh Administration began its tenure under the weight of extensive sanctions imposed in previous years, which had exacted heavy political and financial costs on the country (Manzour & Mostafapour, 2013; Takeyh & Maloney, 2011). President Rouhani harshly criticized these sanctions, labeling them inhumane and designed to disrupt Iran's development:

"Sanctions are an uncivilized act and a dangerous innovation that cruelly target innocent civilians to disrupt Iran's development" (Rouhani, September 13, 2013).

While sanctions had been imposed unilaterally by the U.S. since the Islamic Revolution, their internationalization began in 2006 following the nuclear dossier's referral to the UN Security Council. A series of Security Council resolutions—1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, 1835, and 1929—were passed against Iran (Fallahi, 2017; Mansouri, 2010). These sanctions, deeply intertwined with the nuclear issue, became a strategic priority in Rouhani's foreign policy discourse.

A key reason for the emphasis on sanctions relief—one of the most frequently repeated topics in Rouhani's speeches (Zohouri Ainaldin & Pourali, 2019)—was their widespread political and economic impact, which made countering sanctions a strategic imperative for the Islamic Republic (Mosallinejad, 2015). In the discourse of moderation, international sanctions were not viewed as opportunities for economic self-reliance, but rather as structural constraints causing a decline in GDP and high inflation. Removing them was seen as essential to enabling global economic engagement and attracting foreign investment (Rasouli Saniabadi, 2020).

Consequently, the removal of sanctions that severely affected Iran's economy (Akbarzadeh & Conduit, 2016) became a central pillar of the Eleventh Administration's foreign policy, alongside the nuclear dossier and improved relations with the West (Kameli et al., 2022). Sanctions relief also functioned as a campaign strategy in the 2013 presidential election. Rouhani sharply criticized his predecessor's policies, including downplaying sanctions as "worthless scraps of paper," and highlighted how some individuals profited from sanctions, creating an oligarchy around them (Majidi & Rahimiania, 2018).

Accordingly, sanctions relief became one of the main objectives of the moderation discourse. Rouhani condemned the continuation of sanctions as both unjust and strategically misguided:

"Continuing these unjust sanctions against Iran constitutes a strategic error against a moderate and independent nation, especially in our region's sensitive context" (Rouhani, September 25, 2014).

In articulating this position, the discourse of moderation constructed a chain of equivalence encompassing terms such as "illegitimate sanctions," "illegal sanctions," "uncivilized actions," "dangerous innovations," "unilateral sanctions," and "unjust sanctions."

The most important action undertaken by the Eleventh Administration in this domain was the negotiation with the P5+1 group (the five permanent UN Security Council members plus Germany). Zarif, Iran's Foreign Minister and chief negotiator, stated:

"Our primary goal is to eliminate all nuclear-related sanctions" (Zarif, February 8, 2015) (Zarif, 2014).

These historic, lengthy negotiations led to the signing of the JCPOA and the lifting of sanctions tied to Iran's nuclear program (Fallahi, 2017). Additionally, Rouhani suggested in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit that countering sanctions should be elevated to one of the core principles of the SCO:

"Combating sanctions must become a foundational principle of this organization and its member states, and bilateral relations should be structured free from the pressures imposed by unfair sanctions" (Rouhani, September 12, 2014).

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to examine and identify the semantic system of President Rouhani's speeches during the Eleventh Administration in international meetings and summits using Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis. It sought to answer the question of what the causes, objectives, and actions of the Eleventh Administration were—between 2013 and 2017—with respect to the use of articulated signifiers and discursive elements in these speeches and statements.

Leaders of countries, through their presence and speeches at the meetings and summits of international organizations—typically held annually—construct specific discourses based on their approaches and national interests or emphasize particular discursive signifiers and elements. Identifying these signifiers and articulated elements is important because they reflect the orientation and direction of their foreign policy. In this context, President Rouhani, during the Eleventh Administration—branded as the administration of "Prudence and Hope" and associated with the discourse of moderation—sought to utilize his presence at international platforms to articulate and explain the key signifiers and elements of the moderation discourse in the realm of foreign policy.

The findings of this study indicate that, in addition to addressing important regional and international issues, expressions such as constructive engagement, violence and extremism, terrorism, nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation, the peaceful nature of the nuclear program, and sanctions relief were among the most frequently used and articulated terms in President Rouhani's international speeches. These received more

emphasis than other signifiers and elements. The main reasons and objectives behind emphasizing each of these issues—recognized as key topics in Iran's foreign policy—include presenting the Eleventh Administration's foreign policy orientation, clarifying the positions of the discourse of moderation and the government, proposing solutions for regional challenges, responding to the statements of officials from other countries, especially the United States and European states, and attempting to construct opposition and otherness in contrast to the discourses and narratives of Western countries. Simultaneously, proposals regarding each of these issues were presented within international organizations.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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